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Article

Framing Climate Policy Ambition in the European Parliament

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Abstract
The European Union's climate policy is considered quite ambitious. This has led to a growing interest among political scientists investigating the European Parliament's ability to negotiate such ambitious climate legislation. These studies generally focus on the voting behaviour of members of the European Parliament, which allows us to know more about their positions when it comes to accepting or rejecting legislative acts. However, we know surprisingly little about how they debate and justify their positions in Parliament. In these debates, members of the European Parliament not only identify the problem (i.e., climate change and its adverse effects) but also discuss potential solutions (i.e., their willingness or ambition to fight and adapt to climate change). In addition, plenary debates are ideal for making representative claims based on citizens' interests on climate action. Therefore, this article aims to understand how climate policy ambitions are debated in the European Parliament and whose interests are represented. We propose a new manual coding scheme for climate policy ambitions in parliamentary debate and employ it in climate policy debates in the ninth European Parliament (2019–present). In doing so, this article makes a methodological contribution to operationalising climate policy ambition from a parliamentary representation and legitimation perspective. We find debating patterns that connect quite detailed ambitions with clear representative claims and justifications. There is more agreement on what to do than how to get there, with divides emerging based on party, ideological, and member-state characteristics.

Keywords
climate policy ambition; content analysis; European Parliament; fragmentation; parliamentary debates; policy change

Issue
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1. Introduction

The fight against climate change has become a pressing issue on the agenda of the European Union (EU). The 2019 European elections demonstrated that EU citizens considered climate change to be a major challenge for the Union, which translated into a much higher share of votes for green parties and the adoption of a European "Green Deal" as a major goal of the new Commission's work programme (Braun & Schäfer, 2022). After a period in which climate and environmental issues had been relegated to the bottom of the agenda (Burns, 2019), the start of the ninth legislative period (2019–2024) offered the European Parliament (EP) a renewed opportunity to push for more ambitious policy goals. Indeed, if the EP were still the "green champion" it portrayed itself as since the 1980s (Burns, 2021), it should profit from this new political context and push for substantive policy change. At the same time, the EP faces increasing internal and external pressures that often call its "green" ambitions into question. For one, its gradual empowerment in legislative decision-making has forced it to compromise and become more "realistic"; in addition, its composition has become more varied, both in terms of ideology (with a substantial increase in populist and Eurosceptic parties) and geography. As a result, we see that the EP increasingly faces a trade-off between influence and ambition (Burns, 2019; Wendler, 2019).

This article focuses on investigating the ambition of the EP in the area of climate policy through legislative debates. We argue that this is an ideal method to capture the complexity of this policy area. It allows us to observe how individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) not only frame the nature of the problem (i.e., climate change and its adverse effects) but also justify solutions (i.e., their willingness, or ambition, to fight and adapt to climate change). Therefore, debates reveal the type and justification of policy ambitions rather than their quantity and can help us understand whether different understandings are driven by ideological (left–right), territorial (East–West), or institutional (for/against EU integration) conflict. We develop a conceptualisation of climate policy ambition that can be applied to parliamentary and other political debates. To this effect, we propose a new manual coding scheme for climate policy ambitions based on existing conceptualisations of climate policy activity (e.g., Gravey & Buzogány, 2021; Schaffrin et al., 2015) and complemented by codes to capture the political debate dynamics around representation and justification. In line with this thematic issue, we have a threefold aim: conceptualising climate policy ambition in political (parliamentary) debate, showcasing a new content analysis method to capture kinds and justifications of such ambition, and opening up a new research agenda.

The article first presents the state of research on climate policy ambitions in the EP and provides an overview of how they have been conceptualised and operationalised. We then build on this literature by providing a more systematic coding scheme that allows us to better understand the patterns of representation and justification in EP debates. The results of the content analysis are presented in the following section. In the end, we conclude that debating patterns connect quite detailed ambitions with clear representative claims and justifications. There is more agreement on what to do than how to get there, with the main conflicts being based on ideological, institutional, and territorial divisions.

2. The European Parliament: Still a "Green Champion"?

The Single European Act brought two major changes to EU policy-making: First, it provided a more solid legal base for EU environmental action; second, it established a new procedure (cooperation), which made it possible for the EP to introduce amendments to the Commission proposal. The Environmental committee (ENVI) used these competences to gain a reputation as an "environmental champion" and push for the empowerment of the EP more generally. This was reinforced with the introduction of the co-decision procedure in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), which turned the ENVI committee into a laboratory for new forms of cooperation between the two co-legislators (the EP and the Council). Although the Treaty of Lisbon was less of a game-changer in the area of environment, it was significant for climate change in a wider sense, since it enlarged co-decision rights to areas that had been dominated by intergovernmental concerns, notably agriculture and fisheries. It also extended the right of the EP to ratify international agreements, which had important repercussions on the external dimension of climate change—especially in areas connected to trade and environmental policies (Biedenkopf, 2015; Burns, 2021).

2.1. A Trade-Off Between Influence and Ambition?

The last decade has shown that, despite having more legislative influence, the EP has not always fought for more ambitious climate goals. Indeed, it increasingly faces a trade-off between exerting influence and acting as a "green champion." This trade-off relates to various internal and external changes.

First, the EP's role as an environmental and climate advocate has been limited by the state of polycrisis, moving these issues lower on the Commission and member states' agenda. With fewer legislative proposals coming through, the EP had fewer opportunities to make a difference (Burns, 2019). In addition, the role of the EP also became more differentiated when it came to advocating climate ambitions on external and internal actions. In the field of external action, the EP continued to act as a "green leader," especially with the use of resolutions and own-initiative reports. It also intensified its expertise and informal contacts with other EU and external actors to be more influential in international negotiations. In comparison, when it comes to internal actions, where the EP acts as a co-decider, its ambitions became more moderate, often offering concessions and flexibility to member states, especially on issues related to (implementation) costs. Therefore, non-legislative resolutions tended to be seen as "cheap talk" and portrayed more adversarial interactions, while legislative debates tended to be more technical and prone to accommodating contrasting views (Biedenkopf, 2019; Burns, 2019; Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021; Vogeler, 2022; Wendler, 2019). This behaviour is not unique to this policy area; with the extension of co-decision, we have seen an increasing distinction between non-legislative actions, where the EP can be more ambitious and formulate "wish lists", and legislative actions, where it needs to be more "realistic" or "responsible" in order to find compromises with the Council (Burns, 2013; Ripoll Servent, 2015).

Second, the trade-off between ambition and influence is also linked to internal EP dynamics, which have become more complex due to the EU's enlargement and the increasing fragmentation and polarisation among its political groups. This increasing diversity in the EP's composition is particularly visible in the area of climate, which calls for a dialogue between different policy issues and, hence, a diverse group of actors. The shift of focus from the environment to climate has broken the monopoly of the ENVI committee on these issues and given a stronger voice to committees dealing with

competitive goals, such as the economy, trade, agriculture, and industry. This, of course, opens a window of opportunity for less climate ambitious actors to frame the problems and propose alternative solutions (Burns, 2013; Gravey & Buzogány, 2021). These conflicts are more likely in the current composition of the EP, which has become more fragmented and polarised (Ripoll Servent, 2019). While this offers more opportunities for smaller groups such as the Greens and the Liberals to act as kingmakers, it also makes it more difficult to find compromises that go beyond the status quo and push for ambitious climate policies (Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021; Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021; Vogeler et al., 2021). In addition, the increase in (right-wing) Eurosceptic and populist parties increased the number of critical voices towards EU climate ambitions, especially when new proposals concern the distribution of competences between the EU and its member states (Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022; Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021; Vogeler, 2022). Finally, enlargement gave a bigger voice to the less ambitious countries—those concerned about the socio-economic repercussions of transition measures. Among those, Viségrad—and especially Polish and Czech MEPs—emerged as the most vocal critics of climate ambitions (Burns, 2019; Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021; Zapletalová & Komínková, 2020). However, the balance between climate ambition and distributive costs continues to be a major concern for many member states and one of the main reasons why MEPs might vote against their EP political group (Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021).

These dynamics lead us to expect that debates on climate policies will be structured around three conflict lines (cf. Wendler, 2019): First, an *ideological conflict* based on a left–right divide around the regulatory aspect of climate targets and implementation measures; second, a *territorial conflict* based on potential distributive costs for specific countries, regions, and constituencies; finally, an *institutional conflict* related to the extent of EU integration, especially when it comes to providing a budget for supranational actors or giving them control over implementation and sanctioning.

2.2. Capturing the Growing Complexity of Climate Policy Ambition

The existing literature has used several methods to capture the EP's climate policy ambition. The earliest and most widespread studies focused on the policy process and used amendments and documentary analysis to study specific (salient or conflictual) cases. This helped establish who had won and lost, both within the EP and from an inter-institutional perspective (e.g., Burns, 2013; Burns & Carter, 2010; Judge & Earnshaw, 1994). Studies focusing on the policy process are generally accurate in their measurement of policy ambitions since this is necessary to determine the extent of influence exerted by specific institutional actors (Burns, 2019; Gravey & Buzogány, 2021). However, with increasing informality in the negotiation process, it has become more difficult to trace the authorship of amendments and policy solutions. In addition, documentary analysis can determine collective positions (e.g., of a particular political group or the EP as a whole) but does not reveal individual preferences and justifications.

Other authors have focused on the policy output, using roll-call votes to analyse individual positions on policy outcomes. Defining policy ambition is problematic, especially for large-N studies; Buzogány and Ćetković (2021) used the support of the Greens in the votes to signal ambition, although they recognised that this might be an imperfect proxy because even the Greens often support policies that outsiders criticise for not being ambitious enough. Indeed, roll-call votes in the EP plenary are known for being highly consensual since conflicts are "internalised" and dealt with in previous decision-making phases—notably within committees and in trilogues (Bowler & McElroy, 2015; Wendler, 2019).

Here, parliamentary debates can offer this "missing link" since they provide data about individual and group positions on policy instruments. Like most working parliaments, EP plenary debates are well known for their declaratory rather than negotiation character (Lord, 2018). However, plenary speeches fulfil different public functions, from explaining one's position to signalling agreement or disagreement with the EP political group (EPG) or domestic parties, as well as speaking on behalf of specific constituencies (e.g., EU citizens, domestic citizens, and particular social groups; Lord, 2013; Proksch & Slapin, 2010; Slapin & Proksch, 2010). Therefore, they allow us to capture more complex dynamics of agenda-setting, argumentation, and justification. Some authors have recognised these advantages and used parliamentary debates to study the emotions and the quality of deliberations (Roald & Sangolt, 2012), the level and type of climate scepticism among far-right groups (Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022), as well as individual and meso-level dynamics in discursive networks (Vogeler, 2022; Vogeler et al., 2021; Wendler, 2019).

However, current studies tend to focus on the quality of debates and are often rather vague on how policy ambitions/change have been operationalised in the coding scheme. They tend not to differentiate types of ambitions such as climate mitigation and adaptation from environmental ambitions. In contrast, we use parliamentary debates to study the actor's perspective on climate policy ambitions because MEPs discuss the ambitiousness of the proposals on the table and publicly shape the willingness to do something about climate change. They do not only state what they want vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council as their negotiation partners; they also highlight for whom they want this and why, thereby fulfilling key representation and legitimation functions (e.g., Kinski, 2021, p. 87; Martin & Vanberg, 2008, p. 507). This provides us with a more nuanced

picture of climate policy ambitions *within* the EP, which can also help us uncover to what extent the EP has the potential to be influential in *inter-institutional* negotiations. We know that the EP often uses its internal unity and its representative claims to press the Council and Commission for more ambitious policy reform. Therefore, revealing intra-EP dynamics and conflict is essential to better understand the room for manoeuvre that EP negotiators might enjoy in trilogues.

3. Conceptualising and Capturing Climate Policy Ambition in European Parliament Debates

3.1. Debates on the European Green Deal and the European Climate Law

An increasing number of EU member states, including, for example, Germany, France, and Finland, have adopted national climate laws to define their climate policy ambitions and make long-term commitments to the low-carbon transition of their economies (Duwe & Evans, 2020, p. 10). As a central part of the European Green Deal, the European Climate Law (Regulation of 30 June 2021, 2021) establishes an EU governance framework for achieving climate neutrality, thereby amending the existing Governance Framework for the Energy Union and Climate Action (Regulation of 11 December 2018, 2018).

To capture how members of the ninth EP debate climate policy ambitions, we analyse plenary debates at different stages of this policy-making process (for an overview of the timeline, see Erbach, 2021). In the early agenda-setting phase, the European Green Deal debate of 11 December 2019 (EP, 2019) offered MEPs a chance to detail their "wish list" of ambitions. It resulted in the Parliament's resolution of 15 January 2020 (EP, 2020a), which led to the Commission's proposal for a European Climate Law, presented on 4 March 2020 (European Commission, 2020). In the European Climate Law debate of 6 October 2020 (EP, 2020b), the EP adopted its negotiation position (EP, 2020c) before entering trilogues. Such pre-negotiation debates allow ambitions to be communicated clearly; they reflect not only potential internal conflicts but also the efforts made to reach a common position.

3.2. Methodological Approach and Empirical Strategy

We develop a new manual coding scheme that adapts existing conceptualisations and measures of (climate) policy output and activity to investigate the kinds and justifications of climate policy ambitions in parliamentary debates. We build upon previous studies that investigate the contents of policy instruments (Schaffrin et al., 2015), legislative amendments (Gravey & Buzogány, 2021), and electoral manifestos (Huber et al., 2021). At the same time, we take into account that plenary debates are very different from legal texts, policy documents, and amendments, given their interactive character centred on political exchange, coalition dynamics, and linkages to various principals. Therefore, we ask *what kinds of* climate policy ambitions MEPs discuss and how they *justify them* and *in the name of whom* rather than *how ambitious* they are.

Table 1 summarises these main variables with some of their sub-codes and coding questions. For the full codebook and coding instructions/examples, see Section A.1 of the Suplementary File.

First, in defining climate policy ambitions, we start with the well-known distinction between *mitigation* and *adaptation ambitions* (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2018). The former refers to

Table 1. Coding climate policy ambition in parliamentary debates.

Variable	Categories	Coding Question
Type of ambition	Mitigation Adaptation	Does the policy ambition relate to fighting climate change or living with/becoming more resilient to climate change impacts?
Targets	(Non-)quantifiable	Can the target be measured?
	(Non-)sectoral (including an inductive list of actual targets)	Is it an economy-wide target, or does it refer to a specific sector (primary/secondary), e.g., manufacturing, transport, primary energy sources?
	Time horizon	Does the target refer to 2030 (short-term) or beyond (long-term)?
Scope	Demand vs. supply side	Does the policy ambition target demand (citizens, households), and/or supply side (business, industry)?
	Energy sources: • Fossil (coal, oil, gas) • Nuclear • Renewable (wind, solar, hydro, biomass, heat and power)	To which energy sources does the policy ambition refer?

Table 1. (Cont.) Coding climate policy ambition in parliamentary debates.

Variable	Categories	Coding Question
Implementation	Policy fields Directives and strategies Mechanisms and instruments	Which policy measures are (to be) taken to reach the target? (including inductive list)
	Sanctioning	Are infringement procedures or other sanctioning mechanisms discussed?
	Budget/public investment	Are costs, public investment, and budgetary implications discussed?
	Procedures and actors	Are specific implementation procedures and responsibilities discussed?
	Mainstreaming requirements	Are mainstreaming requirements into other policy areas discussed?
	Policy integration	Is policy instrument discussed in relation to other policy instruments, the entire governance framework?
Monitoring	Reporting Evaluating (academic advisory board) Updating	Are monitoring processes discussed (reporting, evaluating and updating requirements)? Is the role of an independent academic advisory board in monitoring progress discussed?
Stakeholder involvement	Citizens NGOs and interest groups Scientists	How far do actors discuss the involvement of citizens, civil society/interest groups, and scientists in the climate policy process?
Position (each on target and implementation)	Neutral/no position Positive Negative Ambivalent	How does the actor evaluate the climate policy ambition?
Representation	European citizens Member states Future generations, youth, children Business, companies Farmers, foresters, fishers …	Whom does the actor represent when speaking about a climate policy ambition?
Justification	Urgency Intergenerational justice Credibility Solidarity Social justice Fairness Competitiveness Prosperity Feasibility …	How does the actor frame and justify climate policy ambition?

Source: Authors' own work based on and adapted from Duwe and Evans (2020), Gravey and Buzogány (2021), and Schaffrin et al. (2015).

human actions *to fight* climate change, i.e., to "reduce the sources or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases" (IPCC, 2018, p. 554). The latter focuses on what can be done *to live with* the consequences of climate change, i.e., "the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate" (IPCC, 2018, p. 542). Mitigation measures include strengthening renewable energy sources, technologies and materials in a circular economy, expanding public transportation, or changing industrial farming practices and food production. Adaptation measures are, for example, protecting the economy, infrastructure, and people against floods, heat waves, or rising sea levels, but also responding to the health risks associated with climate change. Both academic and public debate has long focused on mitigation ambitions rather than adaptation ambitions (as criticised by, e.g., Pielke, 1998), while more recent research has looked into possible trade-offs and synergies between the two (e.g., Bosello

et al., 2013; Moser, 2012). In its most recent series of reports, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) dedicated special attention to adaptation measures. In this article, we focus on which kinds of ambitions MEPs talk about, how they talk about them, and in the name of whom they speak, rather than making an a priori judgment about which kinds of ambitions are more important, feasible, or desirable. In this actor-centred approach, we want to uncover which ambitions MEPs, as central political actors, focus on.

In a second step, we define five core elements of climate policy ambitions based on Duwe and Evans (2020), Gravey and Buzogány (2021), and Schaffrin et al. (2015): *targets*, *scope*, *implementation*, *monitoring*, and *stakeholder involvement*. What distinguishes our approach from theirs is that we use these core elements to capture *kinds of climate policy ambitions in political (parliamentary) debates* rather than creating an index of how ambitious different legal provisions and policy instruments are.

Targets refer to the mitigation and adaptation objectives that are to be achieved. We can distinguish (a) (non-)quantifiable, (b) sectoral/economy-wide, and (c) short and long-term goals (Duwe & Evans, 2020; Nachmany & Mangan, 2018). Do MEPs talk about specific, measurable targets with a clear time horizon, e.g., achieving climate neutrality by 2050 or reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by 2030? Alternatively, do they simply state that there needs to be action to protect the climate and reduce global warming? Research on national climate legislation has repeatedly found that clear targets signal credible commitment to stakeholders, international partners, and citizens, and provide benchmarks for evaluation (Nachmany & Mangan, 2018, p. 2). By publicly debating the merits and flaws of such well-defined goals rather than making vague calls to action or solely emphasising the adverse effects of non-action, MEPs play an important role in providing these linkages. To capture the overall *scope* of a climate policy ambition, we code in how far MEPs consider (a) the supply (i.e., industry, business, and companies) and demand sides (i.e., citizens, consumers, and households) of a policy ambition as well as (b) different energy sources (fossil, renewable, and nuclear; Schaffrin et al., 2015, pp. 267–268).

Implementation encompasses all policy measures, tools, and instruments to achieve the targets (Duwe & Evans, 2020, pp. 14–15). Here, we distinguish by the specificity of the solutions MEPs propose: (a) *specific policy instruments and mechanisms*, such as the CO_2 border adjustment mechanism, carbon taxes, or the European Emissions Trading System; (b) *EU directives and strategies*, such as the Directive on Carbon Capture and Storage or the EU Forest or Farm-to-Fork Strategies; (c) entire *policy areas,* such as the Common Agricultural Policy or trade policy. Further, we record how far MEPs mention *budget/set expenditure*, *implementation procedures and actors*, *sanctioning mechanisms*, *mainstreaming requirements,* and *policy integration* (Schaffrin et al., 2015, pp. 267–268; see also Table 1 and Section A.1 in the Supplementary File).

MEPs may further discuss *monitoring* which includes *reporting*, *evaluating*, and *updating* both targets and implementation steps. Here, we also record what MEPs say about an *independent academic advisory board* involved in progress monitoring (Duwe & Evans, 2020, pp. 32–34). Finally, MEPs may want to publicly debate *stakeholder involvement* through formal consultation procedures and other participatory formats, be it *citizens and voters*, *civil society organisations and interest groups*, or *scientists* beyond monitoring roles (Duwe & Evans, 2020, pp. 35–38).

Besides these core elements of climate policy ambitions—well known to researchers who study policy change and diffusion—we bring in additional elements to capture the political dynamics of how MEPs debate these ambitions. First, and unsurprisingly, this regards the *positions* that MEPs take on targets and implementation. This distinction is worthwhile because we may well see a positive stance on climate neutrality coupled with a negative assessment of a specific measure used to implement this goal. Second, we include the *representation* dimension, namely whom MEPs claim to represent when discussing climate policy ambitions (de Wilde, 2013). When debating decarbonisation or energy transition, do they speak on behalf of businesses and farmers, or do they stress the needs of vulnerable population groups and future generations? Do they claim to represent European citizens or member state interests on climate action (Kinski & Crum, 2020; Vogeler et al., 2021)? Finally, the *justification dimension* identifies the different frames MEPs use to justify why they advocate for or against certain policy ambitions. Broadly speaking, research on justification frames in parliamentary discourse distinguishes between resource-based, norms-based, and cultural justifications (cf. Wendler, 2016, pp. 35–39). On the one hand, resource-based justifications follow the logic of consequentiality in that MEPs stress the costs and benefits of climate (in)action, including economic consequences and feasibility concerns. On the other hand, norms-based and cultural justifications align with the logic of appropriateness in that MEPs highlight certain values, principles, and moral standards when justifying climate policy ambitions. Like the representation dimension, this dimension was coded inductively and encompassed norms-based frames such as responsibility and urgency, solidarity and social justice, alongside resource-based frames such as prosperity, competitiveness, and feasibility, as well as cultural frames including sovereignty and cultural identity (for a detailed description of the individual frames, see Section A.1 in the Supplementary File, pp. 10–11).

The *coding unit* was every individual climate policy ambition within a speech given by an individual MEP as part of the entire plenary debate. The coding involved a two-step process: First, climate policy ambitions were

identified as mitigation and/or adaptation ambitions; second, their core elements were coded, including MEP position, representation, and justification. Two coders coded the debates based on the detailed instructions in the codebook (Section A.1 in the Supplementary File) using MAXQDA. A reliability test was conducted and exceeded accepted standards (see Section A.5 in the Supplementary File). Formatting plenary debates as so-called "focus groups" allowed us to automatically identify MEPs as speakers in the documents and merge metadata on their EPG affiliation and member state of origin. Non-English EP debates were translated into English using DeepL and sample-checked by native German, Spanish, and Greek speakers. Results were highly accurate, including reliable named-entity recognition. It was virtually impossible to distinguish translated from original English speech contributions. This practice has proven robust and is increasingly used when researching multilingual, political communication (e.g., Reber, 2019).

The following section presents key results on debating patterns around climate policy ambition in the EP to show that our conceptualisation makes sense empirically and showcase our method for uncovering these patterns. Naturally, this cannot include all patterns and codes. Therefore, our aim is rather to highlight the main findings that we see as a starting point for a new research agenda on climate policy ambitions in political debates.

4. Results

4.1. (Un)Ambitious for Whom, on What, and Why?

In the coded debates on the European Green Deal and the European Climate Law, 134 different MEPs gave 152 speeches containing 791 climate policy ambitions, with over 60% being mitigation ambitions. Interestingly, adaptation ambitions were virtually absent from the debates (under 2%). What we do see is a frequent reference to "general ambitions" (27%) and "environmental ambitions" (10%); hence, we added these categories inductively during the coding process. The former included generic calls to action such as "we must protect the planet" or "we must be more ambitious on climate change." The latter contained calls to protect biodiversity or stop nature pollution and deforestation. Usually, they were linked to mitigation and adaptation, such as in the case of clean air, reforestation as a carbon sink, and acting upon the loss of biodiversity because of climate change:

> People's lives like the life of Sanna Vanar. She is from the Saami culture from Sweden and the culture is based on the cultivation of reindeer, but the reindeer are on the verge of getting extinct due to the climate crisis. Sanna says: "If we lose the reindeer, we lose the Saami culture too." We are here in the European Parliament; we are here to represent them, and we can do something about their future. (Michael Bloss, Greens/European Free Alliance [EFA], Sweden, Climate Law Debate, 6 October 2020)

Frequently, however, environmental ambitions were not explicitly connected to climate policy ambitions, and sometimes were even in clear opposition to them: "The Renewable Energy Directive has led to perverse incentives and environmental damage caused by expensive wind farms that kill migratory birds and bats and harm our precious marine resources" (Robert Rowland, Identity and Democracy [ID], UK, Green Deal Debate, 11 December 2019). Regarding adaptation, we do see talk about the adverse effects of climate change, but there is surprisingly little on how to become more resilient to them. On agriculture, for example, MEPs acknowledged the negative consequences of droughts but debated whether and how to change EU farming practices to mitigate climate change rather than how to adapt to changed environmental conditions for farming.

Regarding *targets* and *implementation*, we see three distinct patterns. First, the debates centred on quantifiable, non-sectoral, short- and long-term targets. The most frequently discussed targets were climate neutrality by 2050, greenhouse gas emission reductions by 2030 by various percentage points and ending the fossil economy. MEPs especially debated sectoral targets for the primary energy sector, farming and livestock, as well as the transportation sector.

Second, while 70% of positions towards targets were positive, the discussion on implementation steps was much more reserved, with around 60% of positions being either negative or ambivalent. While many MEPs agreed on where to go, they disagreed on how to get there. MEPs aimed to implement climate policy ambitions through many different strategies and mechanisms, ranging from energy, agriculture, and trade, to technology and innovation or infrastructure and transport (Section A.2 in the Supplementary File).

Third, MEPs also clearly established a representative connection by emphasising who all of this is for and why they advocate certain policy ambitions. Figure 1 displays all representative claims (left side, n = 369) and justifications (right side, n = 723) scaled to their frequency.

Almost one-fourth of all representative claims went to citizens, followed by an equal share of claims to represent member states (14.6%) and business, companies, and industry (14.4%). Overall, these three constituencies made up more than 50% of all representative claims, suggesting the existence of ideological, territorial, and integration-based dynamics. MEPs used urgency as the most dominant frame to justify climate policy ambition (14% of all frames) but also employed both social justice (9.1%) and competitiveness (8.6%) as frames, suggesting undesirable consequences of such ambition. Leadership frames, emphasising the EU as an ambitious climate pioneer (8.4%), and adequacy frames, pointing to the need to support worthy and sufficient ambitions given the severity of the threat (8.2%), were closely

Figure 1. Representative claims and justification frames of climate policy ambitions. Note: Detailed frequencies in Section A.3 of the Supplementary File.

followed by feasibility and prosperity frames (6.8 and 6.2%, respectively), again indicating doubts about climate policy ambitions and their practicality.

Overall, this points to diverse debating patterns on climate policy ambitions that need more unpacking, along with ideological, territorial, and integration-based conflicts.

4.2. Ideological, Territorial, and Integration-Based Debate Dynamics

First, the differences between EPGs with regard to how their members evaluated the targets and implementations of climate policy ambitions (Figure 2) show both a left–right and a Europhile–Eurosceptic divide.

Both Eurosceptic and Europhile left-wing MEPs were more positive towards targets, such as 2050-climate neutrality, while the Eurosceptic right (but also, to some extent, the EPP) were more sceptical about them. Although all EPGs were more sceptical about implementation ambitions than targets, this was particularly visible for Eurosceptic MEPs. This is in line with Forchtner and Lubarda's (2022) study, which showed that far-right MEPs criticised how anthropogenic climate change was addressed (process) rather than being sceptical about its existence.

We also see interesting dynamics when we turn to representation and justification patterns along party group lines. While all MEPs spoke in the name of citizens, the prominent representation of member states was mainly driven by MEPs from ECR and ID; in turn, business representation came largely from Renew, EPP, and ID (Table 2). The Eurosceptic left tended to represent vulnerable groups and workers, while the Greens spoke on behalf of future generations. This again indicates both an ideological and, to some extent, an integration-based conflict, at least when it comes to the Eurosceptic right.

Justification patterns by EPGs largely confirm these observations (see Section A.4 of the Supplementary File), although they also show a distinct climate change divide: Those for ambitious targets talked about urgency and adequacy, while sceptics framed their criticism in terms of competitiveness, feasibility and—for ID MEPs—also sovereignty.

As for territorial divisions, Figure 3 suggests that MEPs from the East and West were more divided on their assessment of climate targets than their implementation. Although the majority of positions for both

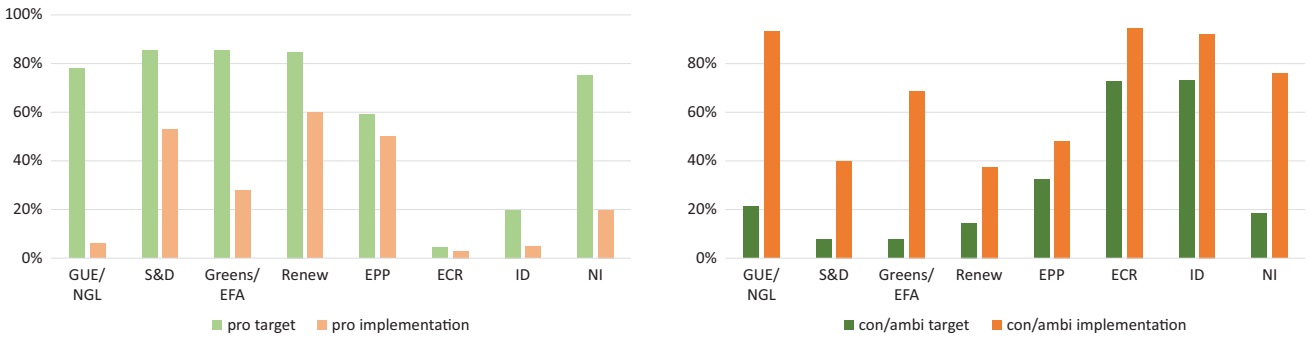

Figure 2. EPGs in % of target/implementation ambitions. Note: Targets in green and implementation in orange; positions in favour on the left (lighter colours) and critical and/or ambiguous positions on the right (darker colours); neutral positions are excluded; GUE/NGL—Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, S&D—Socialists & Democrats, Greens/EFA—Greens/European Free Alliance, Renew—Renew Europe, EPP—European People's Party, ECR—European Conservatives and Reformists, ID—Identity and Democracy, NI—Non-Inscrits.

Table 2. Representative claims by EPG (in %).

	GUE/NGL	S&D	Greens/EFA	Renew	EPP	ECR	ID	NI
Citizens	36	23	30	27	23	24	22	36
Member states		12	5	5	11	41	22	9
Business, companies, industry	7	9		29	19	9	22	9
Next generations, youth, children	7	16	22	5	8		2	
Regions		10	5	12	11	7	2	9
Workers	14	5	3	5	9	4	8	18
Vulnerable, marginalised, poor	29	7	14	5	3	2	6	9
Farmers, foresters, fishers		5	5	7	8	9	6	
Protesters	7	6	14		1			
Families		1	3		3	2	4	9
Miners		4			1	2		
Consumers		1		2	3			
Small producers, SMEs				2	1		4	
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N claims (Speeches)	14 (9)	97 (35)	37 (17)	41 (23)	101 (33)	46 (15)	49 (13)	11 (7)

groups towards targets were still positive, Central and Eastern European (CEE) MEPs used a more critical tone. On implementation, they were actually more united, but this unity was in opposition to the measures proposed by the Commission.

MEPs from CEE framed climate policy ambitions rather in terms of feasibility and competitiveness. Being especially coal-dependent, they feared the loss of prosperity and frequently questioned the feasibility of the low-carbon and ecological transition, advocating for technological neutrality and gas as a bridging technology. MEPs from the West stressed the need for urgent and ambitious action (Table 3). Regarding representation, CEE MEPs claimed to represent their national interest in 26% of their claims, whereas Western European MEPs only did so in 9% of the cases (see Section A.4 of the Supplementary File). CEE MEPs also specifically spoke about the needs of their coal regions (in 10% of the claims) and the coal miners. Their colleagues from Western Europe, on the other hand, referred to business needs and future generations (10 and 6% of claims, respectively). Despite these differences in representation, MEPs largely agreed that the ecological transformation must be fair, solidary, and just so that it does not leave anyone behind.

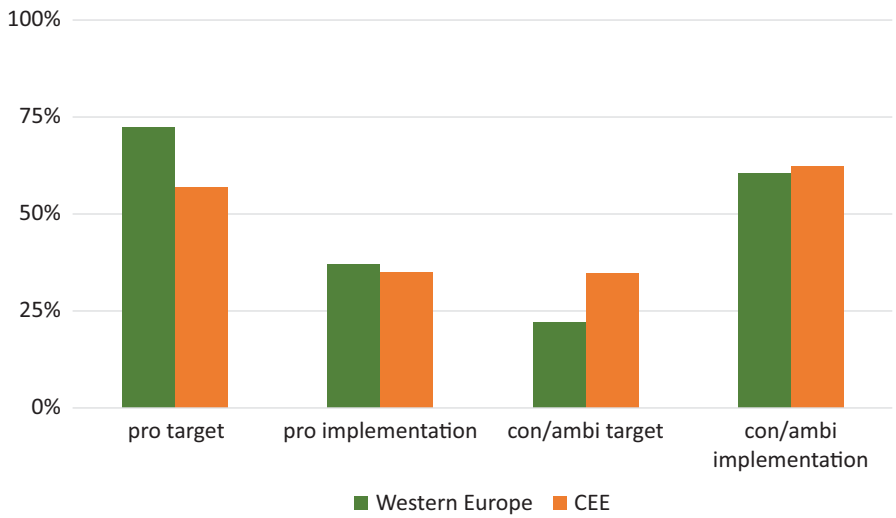

Figure 3. MEPs from Western Europe and CEE in % of target/implementation ambitions. Note: Neutral positions excluded.

Table 3. Justification CEE and Western Europe (in %).

	CEE	Western Europe
Urgency[a]	11	15
Social justice[a]	10	9
Competitiveness[b]	8	9
Leadership[a]	6	9
Adequacy[a]	6	9
Feasibility[b]	11	5
Prosperity[b]	10	5
Fairness[a]	7	6
Responsibility[a]	6	6
Solidarity[a]	5	4
Credibility[a]	2	5
Inclusiveness and accessibility[a]	5	3
Intergenerational justice[a]	4	3
Consistency and coherence[b]	2	3
Sovereignty[c]	4	3
Health[a]	3	2
Cultural identity[c]	1	1
Transparency[a]	2	0.4
Accountability[a]	2	0.4
Negotiation tactics[b]	0	1
Total	100	100
N frames (speeches)	201 (48)	522 (104)

Notes: [a]Norm-based, [b]resource-based, and [c]cultural justifications (cf. Wendler, 2016).

5. Conclusions

This article set out to investigate the climate ambitions of the EP. In a new legislative term, where climate and the environment have become one of the priorities of the EU, it is important to understand the position of the EP. We need to uncover not just who is in favour or against ambitious climate goals but also what these positions actually mean and how they are justified towards (specific) constituents. To this effect, we introduced a new manual coding scheme of climate policy ambitions suitable for the analysis of parliamentary debates; one of its major advantages is that it allows us to, first, get a much more nuanced picture of ambitions, and, second, it also captures the dimension of representation and justification.

Substantively, we find quite detailed debate on policy ambitions, more sceptical and polarised on implementation than on targets. We also show that MEPs establish representative linkages by making claims and justifying their positions on ambitions. However, these claims assemble very different types of constituencies: While most refer to citizens, there is a significant proportion of claims that speak on behalf of member states as well as businesses, companies, and industries. This diversity shows that there are important divides along the ideological, territorial, and integration fault lines that might give rise to climate change conflict, pitting those in favour of ambitious targets against more sceptical MEPs worried about competitiveness, feasibility, and even sovereignty.

Therefore, our method of analysis has produced valid results that correspond to common patterns we know, while also uncovering nuances that we would not have seen by only looking at voting behaviour or limiting our analysis to policy content (e.g., amendments). Coding parliamentary debates provides a much richer insight into the policy-making process since it uncovers dynamics not only at the meso-level (e.g., EPG) but also at the individual level. It also helps better understand how positions change over the policy process and how these changes are justified. It also allows us to determine where unity and fragmentation exist within the EP. This can help us uncover the conditions under which the EP might have (or not) success in influencing policies during inter-institutional negotiations. For instance, it indicates that while the EP negotiators could rely on a wide degree of support for pushing for more climate ambitions, they might struggle to commit member states

to tighter targets and implementation. There, national concerns and worries about specific constituencies (e.g., industry or business) might make it difficult for the EP to speak with a single voice—opening a door for the Council or specific member states to co-opt sectors of the EP or specific national delegations to support less ambitious policies. Future research could investigate this link between internal (dis-)unity and inter-institutional influence in climate policy more closely.

Therefore, this article shows that using parliamentary debates to examine the different policy and justification frames is a valid method that opens a new research agenda for the study of (parliamentary) climate ambitions. First, we can use our manual coding scheme to further explore the nature of the EP's climate ambitions and the driving forces behind specific conflicts. There, we could also compare to what extent the driving forces behind these conflicts (ideological, territorial, and institutional divides) are also present in MEPs' voting behaviour. This would allow us to investigate whether and why there is a gap between discursive and voting positions. Similarly, we could examine how positions change between different stages of the policy-making process and whether different types of debates (legislative vs. non-legislative) lead to different types of frames.

Second, while we only had limited space here, it may be worthwhile to investigate whether expertise (e.g., being a relais actor or part of a certain committee), nationality (e.g., centre-periphery dynamics), and gender (female MEPs talking differently about climate policy ambitions or claiming to speak on behalf of women) lead to different positions and forms of justification. Finally, our coding scheme can be used in other parliaments and possibly even other forms of political debate to uncover the factors that shape how political actors speak about climate policy ambition.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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